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WWII Surgeon Develops Light Field Ambulance

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With the rigorous climactic conditions in the Pacific Theater, came the greater need for versatile vehicles capable of transporting casualties across the rugged terrain.

Like the birth of smart phone culture and social media a century later, the first decades of the twentieth century saw great societal changes at the hands of new technology, namely the automobile. Roads and traffic laws, traffic signs and signals, garages and gas stations sprouted up across the U.S. landscape during these years; and at military medical facilities the quaint horse-driven carriages were gradually replaced by electric and later gas-powered automobile ambulances.

By the 1910s, the increasingly robust “motorized” medical fleet at stateside military hospitals soon expanded to field operations in Haiti (1915), the Mexican Punitive War (1916) and in France during World War I. However, despite these early developments, the field medical ambulance really came to maturity in the Pacific Campaign in World War II. (1)(2)

With the rigorous climactic conditions in the Pacific Theater, came the greater need for versatile vehicles capable of transporting

casualties across the rugged terrain. Throughout World War II, the Army and Navy commonly used the Dodge Model ¾ ton truck, known as the “field ambulance,” for overseas operations.

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According to reports, the Dodge was “least likely to produce shocks over rough roads,” carried four litters, protected the patients from rain and dust and was even equipped with a heater to keep wounded personnel warm. (3) It was soon joined in theater by a Navy-designed Jeep ambulance.



Jeep ambulances on Iwo Jima proved to be the most valuable single piece of motor transport in the medical organization and were used to haul thousands of casualties in that operation.

The Willys Jeep was first produced in 1941 for the U.S. military as a dependable off-road, “general purpose” vehicle. In March 1942, Lt. Cmdr.

French Moore, MC, a battalion surgeon with the 2nd Medical Battalion, 2nd Marine Division at Camp Elliott, Calif., saw the Jeep as the perfect “light field ambulance” that could be used in combat areas as well as at overseas bases and training centers. Jeeps were more compact, easier to load and unload than the Dodge model, and offered a greater range of maneuverability between the area of combat and the collecting station. It could travel at an average of ten miles per hour and carry up to “35 patients 1,000 yards and return in an hour.” (5) The Jeep was also more economical and could be easily altered.

In creating the prototype for the Jeep ambulance, Moore removed the vehicle’s canvas top, windshield, right front seat, and turned around the rear seat to run “fore and aft” behind the driver’s seat allowing space for two Stokes stretchers and two sitting wounded. (6) After extensive experimentation, Moore submitted blueprints, and records of performance of his prototype to Marine Corps Commandant Lt. Gen. Thomas Holcomb; it was approved for use in time for the Solomon Island Campaign. (7)

In Guadalcanal, seven Jeep ambulances were used for casualty evacuation. (8) Moore’s Jeep ambulance would later be used on Peleliu, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. According to reports, “Jeep ambulances on Iwo Jima proved to be the most valuable single piece of motor transport in the medical organization” and were used to haul thousands of casualties in that operation. (9)

Moore would receive the Letter of Commendation for “skill, initiative, and foresightedness in connection with the development of the Jeep Ambulance. (10) His innovative Jeep ambulance would survive the war and similar models would later be used in the Korean War and Vietnam.

Sources:

1. Sobocinski, Andre. “History of Navy Ambulances. Part I: The Advent of the Automobile Ambulance.” *The Grog*, Issue 38, 2014. Pp 16-18.
2. Sobocinski, Andre. “History of Navy Ambulances. Part II: Ambulances of the Great War.” *The Grog*, Issue 39, 2014. Pp24-25.
3. BUMED History Division. “Okinawa.” *U.S. Navy Medical Department Administrative History*. Vol. 1, Chapter XII, p13-14.
4. The term “Jeep” predated the automobile of the same name and had been used

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throughout the 1930s to refer to everything from tanks to soldiers. Although not substantiated, the term “jeep” is said to have derived from “G.P.” an abbreviation for “General Purpose.” In March 1936, the character “Eugene the Jeep” first appeared in E.C. Segar’s comic strip *Thimble Theater*. Purportedly, Jeep vehicles in World War II were sometimes referred by the name “Eugene.” Source: Wilton, David. “Jeep.” www.Wordorigins.org

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- 5. Moore, French. CO, 2d Medical Battalion, 2d Marine Division, FMF, Camp Elliott, Calif. to Commandant, USMC. 11 March 1942. N-33-3. Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Record Group (52) National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, Md.
- 6. Moore, French. CO, 2d Medical Battalion, 2d Marine Division, FMF, Camp Elliott, Calif. to Capt. Carlton Andrus, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. 17 March 1942. N-33-3. Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Record Group (52) National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, Md.
- 7. Arthur, J.M. CO, HQ, 2d Marines Reinforced, to Vice Adm. Ross McIntire, Chief of BUMED. January 17, 1943. CPVN-rs. Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Record Group (52) National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, Md.
- 8. Two locally modified jeep ambulances were deployed to Guadalcanal at the start of the campaign; five factory modified jeep ambulances were used in the late stages of Guadalcanal.
- 9. BUMED History Division. “Two Jima.” *U.S. Navy Medical Department Administrative History*. Vol. 1, Chapter XI, p59.
- 10. Moore Biographical Sheet. BUMED Archives.

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